

PARENTING

## Parenting 101: How To Deal With Bullying

Statistics show more than two-thirds of children will experience bullying at some stage – often as tweens or teens. And yet, many of them never tell anybody: a mix of fear, embarrassment and a lack of faith in support systems is usually to blame. That's why, as a parent, it's important to know what to look out for and what you can do about it. For Anti-Bullying Week, we asked three child psychologists and behavioural and mental health experts to share their advice – as well as one mother who's experienced it first-hand...

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## First, what does bullying look like today?

"Bullying is the intentional physical, emotional or psychological harm of one person caused by another or a group of others. Bullying may come in many forms and research suggests bullying amongst the sexes may manifest differently, with males resorting to physical domination or humiliation of another, while females tend to use subterfuge tactics such as exclusion, name calling, psychological torment or humiliation. Bullies are often insecure and choose to dominate others for fear of being 'exposed' as weak or inadequate. Cyberbullying has also seen a rapid rise in the age of social media and may take the form of cruel, humiliating or threatening messages, revenge-porn, websites or imagery being created designed to cause psychological harm and repetitive behaviours known as 'spamming' to cause inconvenience or distress." – Dr Alison McClymont, child psychologist

## What's the impact of the different types of bullying?

"In some ways emotional bullying can cause more damage, as it is often not as clear as physical bullying, so the bullied child blames themselves a lot more. Oftentimes, the bully can be a close 'friend' who sends mixed messages to cause even more self-doubt and self-blame to the bullied child. In cases of physical bullying there are often visible traces of the harm, so it can sometimes be stopped sooner than emotional bullying. One of the worst types of emotional bullying is cyberbullying, because the individuals can hide behind fake identities and say things they wouldn't say to someone's face." – Dr Shadi Shahnava, head of child & family service at The Soke

## What are the red flags to look for which might suggest your child is being bullied?

"Aside from physical injury in the case of physical bullying, emotional symptoms will likely be the same. The victim may become withdrawn or refuse to participate in social activities; they may become irritable or easily distressed. It may affect their sleep or eating patterns. In extreme cases bullying can produce self-harm behaviours or suicidal thoughts. In both instances shame is the intention of the bully, and shame may manifest in physical bullying as covering up the physical hurt or 'laughing it off'. In emotional bullying, shame may cause the sufferer to question if they have 'caused' the torment and attempt to ingratiate themselves to others or change their behaviour." – Dr Alison McClymont

## Should you ever try to confront them about it?

"You should let them know that you have noticed a change in their mood and behaviour, and that you wonder what's going on. The most helpful thing to do is to listen to them and reiterate how they tell you they're feeling with phrases like, "I hear you're very angry and feel helpless." You shouldn't try to say things like, "But you also have friends remember?" because the child will assume you don't know how much they're suffering. Remind them of the friends they may have at another time. Instead, ask them what they think would be helpful and come up with ways to tackle the situation together. Even very young children have opinions, so it's okay not to agree but make them feel listened to in the first instance. Come back later and say that, having heard what they said, you have thought about it and would like to take action and explain why. Children feel reassured knowing the adults in their life are trying to keep them safe." – Dr Shadi Shahnavaz

## What are some of the steps you can take?

"Children are often worried about sharing that they're being bullied, so it's important to listen and reassure them that you won't take any action without agreeing a plan with them first. To support your child in making a decision, you could look at the school's anti-bullying policy to get an understanding of how the school would address the situation. Older children and teenagers often want to try and manage the situation themselves first and prefer to have you as their sounding board where they can talk through some scenarios and how they might manage them. It's important your child has some supportive friends, and it can be helpful for them to spend quality time with them away from school to build confidence. You could also seek support from the parents of your child's friends.

"If you decide together that it's not working, and more support is needed, you should approach the child's head of year. If the bullying continues, make a written complaint to the head teacher in writing, express your concerns and demand that the bullying must stop. Request a copy of the action taken by the school thus far. Your school will have a complaints policy, so familiarise yourself with this in case you need to take things to the next stage. If you're invited to any meetings at the school, be sure to take some support with you and take notes. Keep talking and checking in with your child throughout this process, asking them what they would find helpful." – Paula Talman, founder of iSpace Wellbeing, a mental health and wellbeing curriculum

## Should you ever try to talk to the other parents directly?

"This would greatly depend on the relationship you have with the other parents and how receptive they might be to hear their child is a possible bully. If you do go down this route, it's important to approach the conversation as a 'let's sort this out' kind of chat. If the behaviour has gone beyond a certain point, a conversation might not be appropriate – you could instead choose to inform the parent of your next course of action, such as contacting the school or police." – Dr Alison McClymont



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## What if teachers or the other parents ignore the problem?

“People sometimes forget that what constitutes bullying (physical harming of another, harassment, cyberstalking etc) is actually a crime. If an adult hit another adult, we would likely report it to the police, and you can do the same for children. Children deserve to have the same civil rights to a safe and peaceful life as adults do, and the police should be there to protect those rights when other avenues have been exhausted.” – Dr Alison McClymont

“Start by following the school’s anti-bullying policy and procedure, and give them a few days to consider this before starting the formal process. If the school fails to follow the procedure or does not deal with it in a satisfactory matter, request the school’s complaints policy and initiate a complaints procedure. You can also seek support from the Anti-Bullying Alliance, Children’s Legal Centre, Family Lives, Childline and YoungMinds. If the issue is not resolved after you have followed the school’s complaints procedure, you can also raise a complaint to Ofsted. As well as inspecting how schools perform, they have the powers to consider certain complaints about schools. For more information on making a complaint about a school if a bullying issue is not resolved, visit [Contact.Ofsted.gov.uk/Online-Complaints](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk/contact-us/online-complaints). As a final resort you could also raise your concern with the local authority and local MP.” – Paula Talman

## What are some of the coping mechanisms a parent can teach a child who is being bullied?

“It’s always important to stress to a child that abuse is wrong, and they haven’t done anything to deserve it. What’s happening to them is unkind, unfair and may even be illegal. Reinforcing the confidence of the child and the idea that they have an absolute right to safety is important. Messages such as ‘laugh it off’ or ‘stand up to them’ may not be the most helpful. That said, you could encourage a child (where appropriate) to develop a more confident persona. This might take the form of reminding them of their rights, reminding them that they can tell someone how to respect their personal boundaries and that abuse is never to be tolerated.” – Dr Alison McClymont

## So you shouldn't encourage a child to stand up to a bully?

"Only if you think doing so will not cause physical harm or threat to the child, and if you think it will be a confidence-building, positive experience for them. It would, for example, be unwise to encourage one individual to physically confront a gang. The best option is to seek safety. Also, for non-neurotypical children, it might be particularly challenging to 'stand up' to another child if they are experiencing panic-induced sensory overload. If you feel your child has the skills to do so, they can firmly express their boundaries, though. Research shows those who do confront bullying at an early stage likely put a stop to it, and forensic research also shows attackers do seek out those they believe won't fight back." – Dr Alison McClymont

"In my experience, looking down on a bully and showing disinterest works better than standing up to them. When you stand up to them, you're giving the bully an opportunity to hit back even more, and it can become never ending. Bullies often want an audience and standing up to them gives them the chance to show off. Belittling them with complete disinterest makes them feel obsolete." – Dr Shadi Shahnava

## What if you find out your child is the bully rather than the victim?

"First, support your child in exploring the cause of their behaviour – you may be feeling embarrassed, let down, and a bit of a failure but you need to put that aside and take control of the situation. Find out what's causing your child to behave that way – there is most likely something that is causing them to feel unhappy. Your child may be worried about how you are going to react, so you need to reassure them you're there to help them. Encourage them to discuss how they've been feeling and empathise with or validate those feelings.

"Also, identify their values – e.g. kindness, trust, honesty, loyalty – and set some clear boundaries. This helps children and young people make better choices. With your older child or teen, it's best to find somewhere where you can have this conversation without them feeling under pressure – perhaps take a drive or go for a walk so they don't have to look directly at you. Consequences also need to be explored – interestingly, children set their own consequences very high, but you can help them reach an acceptable punishment. The aim is to help children and young people to take responsibility for their actions, while at the same time boosting their self-esteem and self-worth." – Paula Talman

## Tell us a bit about cyberbullying and how to deal with it...

"Cyberbullying includes sending, posting or sharing negative, harmful, false or mean content about someone else. It can include sharing personal or private information about someone else causing embarrassment or humiliation. Sometimes, cyberbullying crosses the line into unlawful or criminal behaviour. Often it will occur on social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and Tik Tok or via messaging (text or apps) on mobiles/tablets. It can be hard to detect and prevent, depending on how much involvement you have in managing your child's use of devices. You should make sure you know who your children are talking to online and encourage them to think about what they share.

"With older children and teens, they will want more privacy and you may need to agree parameters about online safety so you can be sure they're protected. If they're worried about cyberbullying, they can also approach organisations such as Childline or YoungMinds, who will tell them to report it and block people who are bullying them. Also, keep the evidence. Write down what's happening and keep screen shots. If you believe there's inappropriate behaviour happening towards your child online, make sure you gather the evidence together and seek appropriate help from the Anti-Bullying Alliance." – Paula Talman

## Finally, what should you do if you think the bullying has done long-term damage?

"Being bullied is very often a trauma that doesn't go away with time and the child might even need professional help. In some cases, if the child can have a positive experience of friendships, they can begin to trust again. If they are badly affected by the bullying and show signs of depression, anxiety and other symptoms, you need to take them to see a specialist to deal with the effects as soon as possible. Being bullied is one of the worst things an individual can go through, but if you get help early on you can overcome the feelings of self-blame that bullying often brings about, to regain confidence and strength." – Dr Shadi Shahnavaz

For more information and support, visit [Alison-McClymont-Psychotherapy.com](http://Alison-McClymont-Psychotherapy.com), [TheSoke.com](http://TheSoke.com) and [ISpaceWellbeing.com](http://ISpaceWellbeing.com).